



# 3 Questions for Those Whose Marriage is "Out of Tune"

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You know what it's like: someone in the choir is "off-key," the karaoke singer is hitting "sour notes," or a lovely little child is banging on a piano. They may be enjoying the activity, but you aren't. Many of us experience similar discordant disappointments in our marriages. These moments of "noise" are not just annoying, they are perplexing and emotionally painful. Even though we read good books, attend workshops, and even "try" marriage counseling, we are still caught off-guard by frustrating relational glitches. The bewildering recurrence of these problems can leave us feeling hopeless for change.

What then happens is that we simply tolerate a dissonant relationship, rather than a life-giving intimate union. Dissonant marriages rarely draw others in, and usually don't energize a couple to love others well.

If you find that your marriage is not where you would like it to be, here are THREE questions to consider.

## DO I FOCUS ON LEARNING TECHNIQUES SO THAT I CAN MINIMIZE CONFLICT?

### Putting 'skills-building' in its proper place

Gaining communication skills and learning to use "I" statements are very helpful in the life of a marriage. But skills alone are not enough as a first step toward oneness. Disappointing marriages require a deeper look at several variables. A common mistake is to over-generalize the problems, and then to offer simplistic solutions. Few people helpers would say that a one-size-fits-all approach to marital problems works. Yet, many care-givers, counselors, and pastors resort to this default solution all too often.

When a focus on skills or techniques comes before a clear identification of the core-issues that give rise to stalemates, we put the proverbial cart before the horse. Skills are important, and we love to help folks learn and apply them. But just as a proper diagnosis of a medical problem is the essential first step to effective treatment, so it is with relationships. Skills are not the first step in relational repair.



Many of us have experienced the absurdity of learning a communication skill only to see it go out the window when we are escalated into an emotional state that hijacks us. We go back to the same old patterns of relating that get us nowhere.

If we don't deal with the triggers that hijack us in our relationships, then we get stuck; stuck in the aloneness that follows the confusing "cacophony." Some folks are miserably stuck. Others are relatively stable, making it work somehow. But they live parallel lives similar to good coworkers or teammates, but, sadly, are missing the emotionally intimate vibrance that God intends for this life-long union.

However, when two people are helped to identify why the music of their relationship is "out of tune" and "off pitch," and those underlying causes of the dissonance are addressed, we see greater probability of lasting change and harmony. What needs to happen, then, is "attunement," a "re-harmonizing" of the marriage.

## AM I WILLING TO LEARN TO VALUE MY PARTNER'S FEELINGS?

### Learning to feel what my partner feels



illustration: marriage geek.com

Marriage researcher John Gottman insightfully coined the phrase "marriage attunement." Attunement is both the desire and the ability to understand and respect your partner's inner world. Or, to put it another way, it is the ability "to feel what your partner feels." Why is attunement important? Because we can't have real oneness without it.

Genuine God-honoring attunement takes deliberate practice. But first we need to understand what exactly it is that we need to practice. Key to progress and change is recognizing the "micro-moments." In such cases, a micro-moment is that instant where I see the rupture that has happened and recognize the opportunity to change my typical way of responding. It's where I know I have to make a decision to respond differently. I have to consider seriously what it will take to change my old habits. It will be counter-intuitive. Truth be told, a willingness to think counter to my old ways of operating on instinct is hard work. It takes more courage than technique to return to your spouse in this way. But, when couples learn to attune to one another, then a more effective life-giving bond forms.

As you might imagine, this attunement process isn't something that can be mastered in a short amount of time. Time created disappointing patterns; time will be required to change them. Oneness is about trust and is a bond that must be nurtured. This is why it almost always requires courage and patience; more courage than technique, and more

patience than proving who's right. It demands that we learn responsiveness—knowing how to do the right thing at the right time to help our partner feel seen, loved and cared for. We want to attune to our partners in a such a way that trust is continually increased and built into the marriage relationship.

In many cases a relationship needs not just repair, but reconnection. And let's be realistic: NOT every relationship can get there. If you're in what is truly a “destructive” marriage, the principles we've addressed thus far must be applied differently.\* If you are in a destructive marriage, know that your Heavenly Father sees you, and will draw near to you. That said, you cannot navigate this predicament well on your own. You will need help.

\*For helpful information regarding destructive marriages, we recommend the biblically rich and insightful instruction in Leslie Vernick, *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage: How to Find Your Voice and Reclaim Your Hope*, WaterBrook Press, 2013.

## **AM I WILLING TO LET OTHERS JOURNEY WITH ME?**

### **Seeking the right kind of outside help**

Research shows that if we don't get the proper help to make changes and/or to solidify them, we can become resigned to something that is less than the “oneness” that God has intended. Some couples, particularly those in ministry, realize that their disappointing marriage involves a bit of a masquerade, and that the pretense cannot be kept up any longer. Continuing to put forth an image of a healthy marriage deepens their conflicted hypocrisy. Hopefully, these couples reach a place of desperation, knowing that things can't continue as they have—especially if they want to be authentic leaders.

At LeaderCare Online, we seek to help you to define what's gone wrong in your ability to “tune in” to your partner. Learning what you can do to lay the groundwork that enables you and your partner to be calm and engaged to hear each other and “tune in” to the other is essential to progress and vital to skills-building.

If you want to learn to pay attention to your partner's needs in the moment and to stay present long enough to bring about harmony, let us know. When two people really agree on their vision for the kind of relationship that they dream of, the music can be symphonically sweet and alluring!



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